

# MISCONCEPTIONS OF PROFESSIONAL SPORTS AND THE BLACK MALE COLLEGIATE ATHLETE

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## ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this review is to aid the black student-athlete in the concentration towards academic achievement as well as to assist athletic departments and athletic administrators in the determination of best practices in establishing guidelines, designing successful retention systems aiding in the improvement of college graduation rates and overall academic realization of the black student-athlete. This will be done by examining the probabilities of financial success of the professional athlete, exploring the academic benefit provided by various professional teams in order to support the completion or the continuation of an athlete's education through advanced degrees or certifications, a discussion of assorted explanations as to why student-athletes may exit their collegiate experience academically unfulfilled, analyzing black student-athlete retention and graduation rates among several NCAA Division I universities and by illuminating successful protocols being used by universities exhibiting the most effective retention and graduation rates for the black student-athlete.*

**Keywords:** Black student-athlete, Sports, Academic achievement.

## INTRODUCTION

The likelihood of individuals who have competed in high school sports becoming a professional athlete is exceedingly low. According to Price (2010), for a basketball player, there is a .03% chance of achieving a career as a professional athlete. For a football player, .08% of high school athletes will go on to play professionally. Baseball has the highest prospect of professional success with .4% of high school athletes attaining the ranks of professional. For the athletes that do make it professionally, the probabilities of sustaining financial security are not favorable. According to Cimpl (2013), "the average professional athlete in the U.S. will make more in one season than most of us earn in our entire lives.... [yet,] despite those staggering salaries, 78% of NFL players, 60% of NBA players and a very large percentage of MLB players (4x that of the average U.S. citizen) file bankruptcy within five years of retirement" (Cimpl, 2013). Couple this with the fact, at NCAA Division I level of college football, in the top 6 football conferences, only 50.2% of black student athletes will graduate in 6 years, compared to 66.9% of student-athletes overall and 72.8% of all students (Harper et al., 2013). With only 50% of these college athletes graduating, and the chances of these athletes sustaining financial security as a professional athlete being minuet, there is a very communal problem needing to be addressed and remedied.

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## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### False securities

Interesting statistics emerge when investigating the topic of graduation rates of black athletes in NCAA Division I athletics. According to Njororai (2012), 44% of black football student-athletes at the Division I level anticipate they will become professional football players. Njororai also found in men's basketball at the Division I level, only 7% of student-athletes believed they would become professional basketball players. Njororai goes on to point out the NFL will recruit 2.3 percent of collegiate football players every year. The NBA will recruit 2.5% of the collegiate basketball players for each season.

### Graduation gaps

Harper et al. (2013) conducted research and prepared a report on graduation gaps existing in many NCAA Division I schools between black athletes and other student demographic populations. They particularly paid attention to the graduation rates of black collegiate athletes with those of white collegiate athletes. They also scrutinized the gaps between black collegiate athlete and the overall student body, and between black student-athletes and the non-athlete black college student populations. The report looked at the rates of the six major NCAA Division I conferences. These conferences are the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), The Big Ten Conference, The Big Twelve Conference, The PAC Twelve Conference, The Southeastern Conference (SEC), and the Big East Conference.

The most distinct discovery of the study was the black student makes up 2.8% of all full-time undergraduate students, yet 57.1% of all football teams and 64.3% of all basketball teams are comprised of black male athletes. Harper and associates found 50.2% of black student-athletes will graduate in 6 years compared to 66.9% of student-athletes overall and 72.8% of all students. Their study also established 55.5% of black non-athlete students will graduate from college in 6 years. The Harper report uncovered 96.1% of these conference schools had graduation rates of black athletes lower than student-athletes and 97.4% of these same colleges have black athletes graduating lower than the general student population. Their investigation also makes note of the fact black athletes are recruited from far less impressive high schools in America than their white teammates (Harper et al., 2013).

According to Lapchick (2010), only 6.6% of head coaches are black in NCAA Division I athletics. Njororai (2012) explains success for the black student athlete depends greatly on the interaction between the black student athlete and his faculty and staff.

Sack et al. (2011) set out to look at the level of seriousness of the "big time" college athlete as far as their education is concerned. They explain 2/3 of Division I student-athletes consider themselves to be more "athlete" than "student". They studied 116 Football Bowl Series (FBS) schools and found the mean Fed Rate for graduation was 54.8%. The Fed Rate is determined by the percentage of students who graduate in 6 years upon entering college. The mean Fed Rate for all other students is 61.9%. They also discovered that the mean Fed Rate for black football student-athletes was 49.8 and the average gap between the football athlete's Fed Rate and the general student population Fed Rate was 7%.

Another interesting finding of Sack et al. (2011) was schools with more athletic success have larger Fed Rate gaps than schools who are not having athletic success. They also illuminated the fact very successful college football programs have athletes averaging 44.8 hours of work dedicated to football per week (Sack et al., 2011).

### **Athletes in poverty**

Huma and Staurowsky (2011), conducted a study on the poverty encountered by the Division I athlete. The major findings of the report found the average “out of pocket” expenses for “full” scholarship student athletes in the Football Bowl Series (FBS) was \$3,222. They also pointed out funding to support a FBS student athlete on “full scholarship” per year would equate to below the poverty line if you took the cash value of the funding and applied it to living in a normal environment. The actual numbers are \$1,874 below the poverty line for an athlete living on campus and \$1,794 for an athlete living off campus. Huma and Saurowsky also illustrate the idea the average FBS athlete, if comparable to the fair market value of a professional athlete, should receive about \$121,048 per year.

### **The art of clustering**

Fountain and Finley (2011) look at the practice of clustering athletes into less rigorous areas of study in order to keep athletes eligible to play and stay academically within the boundaries of NCAA regulations. The practice was first noted in 1974 and the first study on the practice was done in 1987, looking at men’s basketball. Due to more stringent Graduation Success Rate (GSR) policies as of late, the practice of clustering has risen. This is due to procedures in place to sustain collegiate achievement in the classroom by way of the NCAA Academic Reform Package passed in 2004, the Academic Progress Rate (APR). This is done to measure a university as to how effectively their student-athletes are moving forward to progress towards a degree, as well as to maintain a certain grade point average.

Fountain and Finley (2011) studied one, anonymous, ACC Football Program. They found over half of the athletes (52.3%) migrated into the major of Apparel, Housing, and Resource Management (AHRM). Few players of both races initially chose this degree upon entering the University. There were 28 different majors identified in the athlete’s freshmen class, but by the time the athletes reached senior status, the selection was reduced to 14 different majors for black athletes and 16 different majors for white athletes. Initially, 52% of the athletes listed University Studies in their first appearance of the media guide. Minority student-athletes comprised of 66.6% of the team and 33.3% of the team were white student-athletes. By graduation, 60% of the remaining players became AHRM majors.

Fountain and Finley (2011) tracked 135 student athletes that received a “Star” rating by Scout.com upon entering college. Of these 135 student athletes, 40% left college prior to graduation. Of the student athletes completing 4 years of college, 50% listed AHRM as their major. Thirty-seven athletes were drafted into the NFL. Of these 37 athletes, 48% listed AHRM as their major in their last media guide appearance.

Fountain and Finley (2011) were able to track accurately 230 athletes over their collegiate careers as to what subject they were majoring in. Of the 230 athletes tracked, 39 listed business management as their major initially. By the last media guide appearance, 4 business management students remained.

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### **Retention programs**

In reviewing black student retention rates and programs for retaining black students at universities, several conditions are needed to aid in student preservation. Townsend (2007) suggests in order to help retain black students, an increase in “campus life” student involvement is necessary. This is referred to as social involvement. The student socially becoming connected with higher education communities will help funnel them towards graduation. Townsend breaks down the social involvement to include both relationships with staff as well as other black students in the same academic track. Social involvement also includes the orientation and ease of use of facilities and resources for the black student. He also highlights participation in extra-curricular activities benefits the black student to stay involved on campus.

Research has shown black student connections with staff, both formally and informally as necessary for holding these students on campus. It is very important faculty and staff build relationships with the black student to keep the black student. These relationships range along the spectrum of simply asking a question in class to formal meetings to aid the student in their success at the university. Staff members socializing in conversations with the black student outside of academic affairs have shown to improve the black student’s comfort level (Townsend, 2007).

In Townsend’s (2007) review of successful black student experiences, he found formal social integration created more of a positive trend on the black student’s success rate than informal activities. He concluded drop-out rates significantly decrease as student and instructor interfaces increase both in the classroom as well as out of the classroom.

Townsend (2007) looked into first-year programs for retaining black students. Some successful first year programs are the University of Maryland-Baltimore County Meyerhoff Scholars program, which incorporates “Value Programs”, “Study Groups”, a “Community Program”, where individuals meet and discuss academic achievement and individual issues. The Meyerhoff Scholars program also ties in parental support, tutoring sessions as well as internship opportunities. Another program Townsend reviewed is the Freshmen Year Initiative (FYI) program at Fayetteville State University in North Carolina. This program identifies individuals who are struggling and attempts to intervene with tutoring and one on one help, connecting the student with a peer educational advisor.

In Myers (2003) report, a comprehensive retention program should involve, the following components:

- Academic Skills Training
- Assessment Tools
- Career Planning
- Centralized Academic Support
- Collaborative Learning Techniques
- Computer and Internet Training
- Cross-Cultural Awareness Events

- Internships
- Leadership Development
- Learning Communities
- Memory/Concentration Skill Training
- Parent/Family Orientation
- Peer Mentoring
- Personal Counseling
- Developmental Education
- Early Academic Progress/Warning Monitoring
- Experimental Learning
- Faculty Mentoring
- Frequent Meetings
- Freshman Seminar Course
- Freshman/New Student Orientation
- Group learning
- Group Study Sessions
- “Home Base” Environment
- Proactive and Intrusive Advising
- Research Opportunities
- Resident Counselors
- Service learning
- Summer Bridge Programs
- Summer orientation
- Supplemental Instruction (SI)
- Time Management Workshops
- Transfer Services
- Tutoring

Myers (2013) found the benchmark program for all university retention programs to be the Student Support Services (SSS) program. The SSS started in 1991 and has shown the highest success rates for students. Myers noted 80% of students, just by knowing the SSS service was available, felt more confident in their abilities to succeed. Myers goes on to look at the Purdue HORIZONS SSS Program that has a graduation rate of 85%, vs. the control group which demonstrated 47%.

Lotkowski et al. (2004) reported, looking at pre-college enrollment factors can help graduation retention rates. They found the greatest pre-existing factor foreshadowing retention until graduation is a student's high school grade point average (HSGPA). The next pre-enrollment factor for propensity of success is socioeconomic status (SES). Students with a higher SES have a greater support

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network, both financially as well as with family members who have graduated from college. Students in lower SES situations are more likely to have to work while attending school. The researchers pronounce students who receive financial aid have greater retention rates. The third best indicator of degree completion prior to college is a student's ACT score. The writers found when high HSGPA, high SES, high ACT scores are combined with academic related skills, academic self-confidence, academic goals, and social involvement, the probability of success for the college student is the greatest.

## **NFL programs**

A review of the National Football League (2013) and its available programs for available for professional athletes to finish and continuing their education demonstrates the National Football League and team owners have addressed and are providing resources to aid in this arena. The NFL has in place what is known as the National Football League Continuing Education Program (CEP). The goal of the CEP is to help both current and past NFL athletes to finish their undergraduate degrees. The CEP works to partner with the universities the player was attending while playing at the collegiate level and create a situation where the former student can complete his degree. The CEP also works with universities with distance learning programs and partners with these organizations to provide opportunity for the athlete to receive a bachelor's degree. They have exclusively set up partnerships with the top 25 universities which send the most athletes into the NFL. Also, the CEP looks at athletes who were very close to obtaining their bachelor's degree and attempts to persuade and fund these individuals for degree completion. The CEP program has a mission to steer players with degrees to graduate programs as well as look at other educational scenarios, such as specialized endorsement courses or skill centered training programs, which can organize the athlete for life after football. In the 2011 – 2012 season, the NFL's CEP program successfully helped 37 NFL players to finish their bachelor's degrees (NFL, 2013).

The NFL (2013) also provides a program for their athletes to aid them in understanding how to be more fiscally responsible. This program is called the National Football League Financial Education Program (FEP). The goal is to give the athlete a basic education in personal finances as well as teach concepts for better monetary decision-making skills. The objective of the FEP would be to better an athlete's post play economic permanency and sustainability. The FEP accomplishes this education through a series of non-credit courses. These classes work with athletes on investments, real estate, retirement, tax forecasting, insurance, as well as how to manage spending habits. The NFL uses Money Management International (MMI) and Financial Industry Regulatory Authority (FINRA) as their primary service agencies for the financial education of players (NFL, 2013).

Looking at individual NFL franchise initiatives, two NFL clubs seem to have more advanced aid for their players. The Minnesota Vikings (2013), have a player development program to encourage players to take advantage of the NFL's CEP and FEP curriculums. They also embolden athletes to become engaged in community education and family improvement courses. The Minnesota Vikings also provide what is called the Career Internship Program (CIP). The objective of the CIP is to plug players into internships in careers they plan on entering post



athletic career, helping them to build resumes and develop the proper skill sets to enter their profession of choice. The Vikings also place their athletes in the NFL FEP program. This is done in what is called “The Rookie Symposium” which teaches of the difficulties in dealing with the amassing of economic wealth. Second, the athletes attend quarterly clinics, which are labeled “Financial Education Seminars”. Third, the Vikings provide seminars on teaching investments and free enterprise, titled the “NFL Business Management and Entrepreneurial Program”.

The Green Bay Packers also have a noteworthy player development program, with the objective to provide balance both on the field and in the Green Bay community. The Green Bay Packers through their player development program, on top of persuading athletes to continue their education, be more fiscally responsible, and giving them internship opportunities, they train the athletes in what is titled “Packer Values”. These stressed values are of teamwork, excellence, unique small-town identity, integrity, mutual commitment, and fun. The Packers also conduct an annual, mandatory “Life Skills” seminar. The seminar focuses on situations athletes can get into off-the-field where proper decision-making and management need to be applied to. Examples of these issues are anger management, domestic violence, gambling substance abuse, and universal social skills teaching. The Packers also include mandatory training sessions where former players speak, giving advice, stories and examples of how to be successful in the NFL.

## **DISCUSSION**

It is worthwhile to point out, in the Harper et al. (2013) report, there were positive university outliers accounting for high graduation rates for black student-athletes. These encouraging outliers are of utmost importance. Universities such as Northwestern (83% graduation rate for the black athlete), Notre Dame (81% graduation rate for black athletes), Villanova (78% for the black athlete) and Penn State (78%), need to be studied and best practices need to be identified and duplicated. Texas Christian University has a black student athlete graduation rate higher than their all student athlete rate. Seton Hall University and St. John’s University both have graduation rates for black athletes higher than the rest of the general undergrads of their respective universities. These programs too can be studied to a greater extent. The other end of the spectrum needs to be scrutinized as well. Universities failing student-athletes need to be addressed and changes should be made. A shocking statistic at Iowa State University is the fact only 30% of their black student-athletes graduate.

## **SUMMARY**

From the previous review, graduating NCAA Division I African American student-athletes has shown to be problematic, with roughly 50% of the black Division I student-athletes graduating nationwide annually. Not only will many of our black athletes not receive their degrees, they will not reach the levels they had anticipated athletically, setting them in a situation where they may be unproductive with an unfulfilled future. From the information provided, initiatives can be made to increase the likelihood of success through the application of practices done by successful program universities as well as incorporating concepts applied in the National Football League. This information is valuable, and much needed to aid in the forthcoming growth and evolution of NCAA Athletics. Strategies reviewed should implemented to enhance organizational

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practices in order to narrow gaps and create a greater rate of success for the black collegiate student-athlete. Policies and systems where greater black student-athlete successes have been demonstrated should be implemented, such as incorporating studies in values, building study groups, creating community engagement endeavors, forming a parental support system, scheduling tutoring sessions, generating internship opportunities, establishing peer educational advisors, developing a formal social integration calendar, scheduling student and instructor interfaces in and out of the classroom, setting up more extra-curricular activities on campus to increase student-athlete social involvement, incorporating financial planning and fiscal responsibility seminars, offering life skills and family improvement sessions. Also, clustering practices should be monitored and regulated in order to create a greater satisfaction rate in future careers for all student-athletes. These combined best practices may guide future athletic administrators, collegiate coaches, as well as academic departments and the educational schools within universities to increase success rates of the black student-athlete.

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